

DEREK DICKINSON

An Interview Conducted by
Scott Decker

April 8, 2003

For The
Department of Human Services
of the
Township of North Brunswick
North Brunswick, New Jersey

INTERVIEW: Derek Dickinson

INTERVIEWED BY: Scott Decker

PLACE:

DATE: April 8, 2003

[NOTE: Interview begins on side B and ends on side A]

DICKINSON: Now it's Robert Wood Johnson Hospital. And that's October 15, 1956. I'm in the same house that I was born in on Edwin Street. The only difference is I moved from my room to my mom and dad's room.

DECKER: Who was the oldest person you can remember in your family as a child?

DICKINSON: As a child? My grandmother. My Grandmother Rose.

DECKER: What do you remember about her?

DICKINSON: She was my best friend. Short, strong, independent. She was an orphan. A good cook.

WOMAN: Good cook. That's important.

DICKINSON: Our favorite thing used to be to go to McDonald's when it first opened and sit there and have a Whaler sandwich and laugh at the people when they walked by. They used to get a big kick out of that, laughing at folks. Of course behind their back,

not to their face. We would have lunch there and just sit there and make fun of people when they walked by.

DECKER: Where did your parents work?

DICKINSON: Let's see, my father was a mailman. He worked out of the North Brunswick Post Office. He had the largest rural carrier around. It was called RFD 4, and it was 77 miles a day. He delivered mail from where the post office is now all the way to Church Lane and Route 130. My mother was a waitress, and she worked at different restaurants in town.

DECKER: Do you know what their salary was?

DICKINSON: Let's see. Salary, no, that's a tough one. That kind of information was always kept away from us. But my father was a government employee. It wasn't much. I know when we bought the house--I bought the house off my dad--one month of my mortgage payment, one month mortgage payment, was the entire year of his mortgage payments. He paid \$9,000 for the house.

DECKER: How many siblings did you have?

DICKINSON: A brother and a sister. My sister's passed away; she just died this summer. And my brother.

DECKER: Did you all get along well?

DICKINSON: Oh, excellent. Very close family.

DECKER: Did you ever have to share a room with them?

DICKINSON: Well, there's 14 years' difference between my brother and I and nine between my sister. So families always had a tendency of coming back. So they get married, they move away, things happen, and then they end up coming back to Mom and Dad. And every time my brother and sister would come back, we would have to share, we would have to share space because the house was only so big.

DECKER: Right. Did you and your family spend certain days or times together?

DICKINSON: Friday nights. Let's say Friday nights was fish fry and the VFW in Milltown. I remember that.

DECKER: Where was your favorite vacation spot to go with your family?

DICKINSON: Definitely down the Shore, Midway Beach, one of the little bungalows down Midway, South Seaside Park.

DECKER: My grandfather used to own one of those.

DICKINSON: Oh, I own one of those.

DECKER: Did you have any pets?

DICKINSON: Pets? Yes, we had some dogs and cats. I'm not really a pet person. But we had dogs and cats and rabbits. And before you used to be able to have chickens and all kinds of--you know, more of a livestock.

DECKER: Did you name any of them?

DICKINSON: Blackie. I had a dog that was all black, and he was Blackie, and a cat that was white, and that was Whitey. So that was basically it.

DECKER: Did you and your parents talk openly?

DICKINSON: I would think so, for the time. You have to remember it's a long time ago. My father's still alive. He's going to be 80. And my mother died two weeks before I graduated high school. So I didn't really have too much time there because I was still young and trying to find my way.

DECKER: Did you have chores that were split up between you and

other people in your house?

DICKINSON: Chores. I don't recall having to actually do anything specifically. I mean we all had to do stuff. But I don't remember this was my job. My mother used to cover a lot for me. So if I did have a job, she probably did it before my father'd come home. One of those deals.

DECKER: Where did your family buy food?

DICKINSON: Stop & Shop where Michael's is now. There was a Stop & Shop there. And A&P, you know where _____ Savings is, the bank, where McDonald's used to be? That used to be an A&P at the other end. Not where it is now. But it was all the way at the other end. That had burnt down.

DECKER: I did not know that.

DICKINSON: See that.

DECKER: Where did your family buy clothes and other essentials?

DICKINSON: Clothes would probably be like Two Guys. That's where Modell's is on Route 18. Korvette's. You don't remember Korvette's, do you?

DECKER: No.

DICKINSON: How old are you?

DECKER: Fourteen.

DICKINSON: Oh, you don't remember anything. Korvette's. Well, you have your own frame. Thirty years from now you'll remember where what is it Ames?

DECKER: Yes, that was a Caldor.

DICKINSON: That was a Caldor. But prior to that it was E.J. Korvette's. That was a nice store. And then Bradlees was along side of Stop & Shop.

DECKER: Right. And there used to be--there was an A&P there, too, a little while back.

DICKINSON: It was an A&P, and then they did something. They changed it. They moved over to the shopping center.

DECKER: Which used to be Grand Union.

DICKINSON: Which was Grand Union. See, you have memories now. You have to write these down because after a while it all becomes

a blur.

DECKER: Do you remember your family discussing world events and politics?

DICKINSON: Yes, yes. Kennedy was killed. I remember where I was when John F. Kennedy was shot and Martin Luther King. Not so much the Korean War because that was right before my time. World events? Yes. We discussed things.

DECKER: What were your favorite childhood games?

DICKINSON: Place _____ tag. Place _____ tag was when-- See, it was different because-- Well, like even my neighborhood now where there's a lot of kids in it, they don't come out and play. They seem to come home from school, you see them get the bus in the morning. They come home from school; the bus stops right in front of my house so I can see what's going on. Then they go somewhere. We didn't have organized sports like soccer. Like we had stuff, but it wasn't so organized. It was like get the ball, you go play. And what we would do is we would get together after it dark, and everybody had a flashlight, and you picked teams, and you would just go hide in the bushes, and everybody would run around with flashlights. And if you got hit with the beam of light, that was it. Or kickball.

DECKER: Kickball, too.

DICKINSON: Now kickball, if you were in a corner parking lot--
You know where the trailer is of Livingston Park School?

DECKER: Yes.

DICKINSON: Right where your grandfather's property is you would be able-- If you were good--there was only one kid that was good, Danny Paleo. He still lives in North Brunswick, too. He owns Veteran Oil Company. He would be able to kick that ball, it was the red ones. You know the red ones? You know which balls I'm talking about? He would kick it over the catwalk. You know the catwalk that connects the two buildings at Livingston Park? He could kick it over that onto Ridgewood Avenue. He was a lefty. Pretty good. I also kissed Nell Harris back there, too, for the record.

DECKER: What were the schools that you went to like?

DICKINSON: I went to Livingston Park. At that time you were there to sixth grade, and I stayed back in first grade. Mrs. Stahl, she felt that I should--hold me back a little bit. I've always had a learning disability. I have trouble reading. I'm dyslexic where I see things backwards. Like 71 is really 17. At that time they just thought that there was something wrong with

you. It wasn't like all these-- Now they have names for kids who can't pay attention in class and medicines and everything. At that point they just thought that I was having trouble reading, so I stayed back. Then I went from Livingston Park to Linwood, and Linwood was called junior high. That was seventh, eighth, and ninth.

Then after that they shipped us all to New Brunswick High School because there wasn't a high school. And I spent three weeks there. Then after I spent three weeks there, there was an alternative education program set up by Rutgers and Douglass. And I went to Rutgers and Douglass for two years, ninth and tenth grade--ninth, tenth, and eleventh. And then 12th grade I came back here, and I was the first graduating class out of this school. Even though the underclassmen--I think they had like tenth; they might have had ninth- and tenth-graders come over. Right after the high school, they had younger kids come over here to fill the school up because it was empty.

DECKER: How many children were in your classes?

DICKINSON: I don't know. I think they were just normal 20, whatever. At what point, though? You know I went to-- at my high school there were only 67 kids in the whole school. So there were only five or six of us in a class, eight of us in a class. When I came back here, I think it was just a normal amount, 18 or whatever--what is it, 18 to 22, somewhere around there?

DECKER: Was there a lot of drugs and violence in your schools when you went to them?

DICKINSON: Violence--there's always violence if you're looking for it. I was never one for being involved in any type of trouble like that. I didn't have any enemies. I didn't have any racial problems or, you know, I was kind of like neutral where I didn't have any enemies. You know, we got into disagreements and stuff. But I don't remember any violence. Drugs, there was a lot of drugs, just like there is now. And people think that there's not, but there is. It's just that it's not a circle that you discuss it openly. There's not an open format to discuss it.

DECKER: How did you get to school?

DICKINSON: How did I get to school? I took a bus, which was a lot of fun. That was a lot of fun to ride a bus. Then I drove once I got older.

DECKER: What would you say your fellow classmates would remember about you the most?

DICKINSON: I used to like to dress nice. I was polite, I was respectful. And whoever was the weakest link, I always went after them. If there was always someone in our class that was weak and

was being picked on, I would make it a point to sit next to them. Because nobody would pick on me. Not because I was a violent guy, because I was well liked. And if I sat next to you, then I would tell people, why don't you leave him alone, or leave her alone?

DECKER: Who was your favorite teacher, and why were they special?

DICKINSON: Francis DeNola. That was Linwood. I think that was seventh grade in Linwood. And he was a big, rugged, tough, tough guy. He was a football coach. The reason why was because he taught me a lesson that if you had a friend--it was about being honest--and having someone ask you a question, answer it honestly and not B.S. or beat around the bush and be forward about it. And when you have an opinion, be honest about it, and stand up and say, "This is my opinion. It may be different from yours, but this is my opinion."

His scenario was that if you had a friend, and she was a girl, and she had a really ugly dress, and she said to you, "How do you like my dress?" You have a choice: You could either say that I like your dress and let her go out in public and make a fool out of herself. Or you could say, I don't like your dress. I don't think it looks nice on you.

That was one thing that he always taught me was to be honest. And ever since then, with all my friends and family, if they want an honest opinion, even if it hurts, they'll ask me

because I don't lie. I'm very forward, very open. I tell you exactly what it was. And I think that that was a turning point. During the course of the year, though, he died. He had a massive heart attack. There was some rain. He lived on Hermann Road. And there was some rain that was inside the basement, and he was trying to get the rain out, and he had a massive heart attack and died right before we graduated. I think it was eighth grade. Nice man.

DECKER: Did you participate in any sports or other activities in school?

DICKINSON: Sports, let's see, I would have joined the golf team if they'd had one because I love golf, without a doubt. I bowled. I played basketball. Soccer--nobody played soccer. It wasn't a game that we played. You know, we played handball. Handball was a big game. Baseball--I didn't have any interest in baseball. Football--I don't like anybody knocking me down and trying to kill me. You know, what's another sport? Is chess a sport? Is that a sport, or is that a hobby?

DECKER: It can be a little bit of both maybe. How many years of education have you completed?

DICKINSON: I completed high school and then half of my first year at college. And not to make any excuses, my mother had

passed away, like I said, and I was going through a change of--it was tough. I was young. She had died of cancer, so it was a rough death. So my whole adolescence was based on having a sick parent home. So that was it. I went through my first semester of Middlesex, and was unable to concentrate and focus, and that was it.

DECKER: Did you like school?

DICKINSON: I loved it. I was National Honor Society, member of the Key Club.

DECKER: We still have that.

DICKINSON: Here?

DECKER: Yes.

DICKINSON: I was a straight-A student even though it was very difficult for me to learn. My future plan was I was going to be either a police officer or a dentist.

DECKER: What did you wear to school?

DICKINSON: I never wore a pair of jeans in my life. I never owned a pair of jeans. I used to wear like double-knit pants and

nice shirts and pockets. I always liked to be dressed. I always liked to have nice outfits. I didn't come frumpy or grunge. None of that look. I always liked to be nice and neat. That was always one of my looks.

DECKER: Do you remember any fads during school, trends?

DICKINSON: Fads. Like bell bottoms? Clothes-wise? Bell bottoms.

DECKER: Did you ever deal with discrimination?

DICKINSON: Yes.

DECKER: Were you personally discriminated against?

DICKINSON: Yes. And it was a tough time because what we did was we went from a community of North Brunswick people, who are basically white, nice people, hard-working, nice people, to a community of blacks who were basically nice, hard-working black people, and we were thrown into a mix of a lot of reverse discrimination. Blacks always say that they're discriminated, but you don't want to be a white male in this country today. Or, well, women have a little bit of the benefit of the doubt. They're coming along.

But an example would be: I went to school with a kid from kindergarten all the way to ninth grade. Best friends. Black kid.

Loved him. We used to play together all the time. And the first day of school at New Brunswick High School, I walked up to him, wanted to give him a big hug, "Hey, how was your summer?" And he would not talk to me anymore. And he had to protect--now that I'm older I look at it--he had to protect what he thought was his area or his turf, his respect. Where I wanted to be friends with him, but he couldn't be friends with me.

We didn't have a whole lot of black kids. We did have some black families. They were very. They were very nice. I did have one problem with a black student. I don't know. Are we naming names?

WOMAN: ____.

DICKINSON: Unfortunately or fortunately, however, you want to look at it, he had gotten cancer and died. And he was just a miserable rotten person. It had nothing to do with the fact that he was black. He was just a rotten kid. He was just a big bully, and that was it.

DECKER: Was your school segregated?

DICKINSON: Do you mean like bringing kids from other areas?

DECKER: No, like separating in any way.

DICKINSON: Separating? It was self-- It was done because even today--you see even today that the black kids stay with black kids, and the white kids stay with white kids. And it's not because you don't get along or anything like that. It's just that that's just the way it is. I don't know if it's always going to be like that. But black kids have always stuck together--even more so the black kids stick together than white kids. I think that if the blacks were to go and hang out with white kids, they would be accepted with no problem at all. But I think black kids feel like they need to stick together, that it's not cool if you're hanging out with a white guy or a white girl.

DECKER: Where have you lived as an adult?

DICKINSON: Well, after I got married, I did move to Trenton for a short period of time, I think like two months. And then I moved back. So I didn't even have my driver's license changed. So I would say that I've lived in the same house my whole life.

DECKER: Do you still like living there?

DICKINSON: Absolutely. Absolutely.

DECKER: If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

DICKINSON: Well, it would be by water. I love water, and I love sand. And I think part of that is because my fondest memories of growing up was vacations at the beach. So you seem to want to go back to it.

DECKER: What organizations or groups have you belonged to as an adult?

DICKINSON: Let's see. I am a member of the Adams A.C. That's _____ football. I was just Volunteer of the Year. I just got Volunteer of the Year for the association. Business-wise, I'm a member of the American Society of Florists and Greenhouse Growers and, you know, that kind of stuff. That's about it.

DECKER: Do you have any bad habits?

DICKINSON: Bad habits? Well, I guess I have some bad habits....

DECKER: Have you ever been hospitalized?

DICKINSON: An overnight stay, you mean, something like that? Well, years ago I remember I was partying down in New Brunswick, and I ran into a group of Marines, and I had gotten beat up pretty bad. But I don't remember staying in the hospital like overnight, maybe something like that. I had a collarbone broken, but that was it.

DECKER: What do you do regularly for exercise?

DICKINSON: Well, I love golf. That's by far my-- I have two daughters. They keep me very active. I don't have any like a Richard Simmons workout. I don't do anything like that. But work, you know, I keep pretty active.

DECKER: Have you ever been convicted of a crime or any kind of trouble?

DICKINSON: Convicted of a crime? I've never been convicted of a crime. I have had my run-ins with the police as far as like traffic tickets and, you know, that kind of stuff, but never been arrested.

DECKER: If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?

DICKINSON: Oh, I'm a pretty happy guy. I'm a pretty happy guy. Maybe education. Well, I could change that. Maybe education that I would have-- If I could change like going back and change in time, like hindsight, like going back, what would I change? I don't know. I've had a good life. I'm having a good life. I should word it that way there. Maybe try to stay a little more focused when I was younger. I had that 16-- From 16 to 21 was a

pretty _____ time for me. I was pretty on the wild side. But that's when you're supposed to be crazy, when you're young.

DECKER: Right. Have you ever had any experience that you would consider to be supernatural or psychic?

DICKINSON: Supernatural, yes, absolutely. I've had--I feel like I have a guardian angel that watches because I'm phenomenally-- I'm extremely lucky. I'm very, very lucky. If I needed something right now, I can probably.... An example would be, I was hanging a hanging basket because I do interior plant-scaping. I needed a piece of wire so I could tie the basket up properly. And I said, "I need a piece of wire." When I looked down, inside the leaf, right stuck in the leaf, was a little piece of wire. So I've had a lot of things like that happen to me where-- I don't know if it's positive thinking because I'm a very positive person. Or because I'm a good person. I feel like I'm a good person, and I think what comes around goes around. And if you've been good to people, it comes around and gets you.

DECKER: What do you usually dream about?

DICKINSON: Well, there's a couple of nice par threes that I enjoy playing. So usually every night it's, you know, after I say my blessings, because I've definitely been blessed, there's a lot of-- I have a lot of good golf buddies that we play, and I think

of certain holes that I play golf on, and that seems to like relax me.

DECKER: What is the scariest thing that has ever happened to you?

DICKINSON: The scariest thing.... The scariest thing that ever happened-- I have a problem with telephones. I don't like telephones. I don't like the ring of them, I don't like the sound of them, I don't like to answer them. I have trouble calling people back. I don't like to call people back. And the problem with that is that every time the phone-- I've picked up the phone too many times, and on the other end has always been bad news. You know, there's been a car accident, there's been a death. Somebody in my family's been murdered. And it's always been-- I think the telephone. That's the scariest. Whenever the phone rings, I get jammed up a little bit.

DECKER: What is the most stressful experience that you have ever lived through?

DICKINSON: Stressful. Well, there's a lot of stress, especially when you start to raise a family, a lot of worries. You know, you have to put them in perspective and count on your friends and your community. But I don't really-- Let's see, the most stressful time.... Probably business, the way that business is.

I'm a businessman, and I could be very, very successful. I could be very wealthy if I wanted to, if I'd chosen to. But I've made a commitment to my family that my children are more important, my life is more important. And there's a certain sacrifice you make. So I think that stress would be to make sure that there's-- Stress would probably be brought on by my wife because Mary worries about everything, and I don't worry. I have tendency of not worrying about anything.

DECKER: Would you consider yourself to be creative?

DICKINSON: Absolutely. Absolutely. Phenomenal. Gifted.

DECKER: Where do you think your creativity comes from?

DICKINSON: Well, there's a love of flowers that I have, plants. I have a flower shop. That's what I do for my life, not my livelihood. Even if I didn't make my livelihood off of flower, I would have to work in a flower shop or somewhere around plants. When I was small, my mother and father would say, "Hey, how about a GI Joe or a truck or a Matchbox?" And I used to say, "How about a plant?" It was something that I've always had hundreds of plants around me. Sort of like your grandfather. He was someone that I always admired because-- Now times have changed, but when I was growing up, your grandfather was the best by far. He was definitely-- Any job that he had his hand in, it was the best. So

I had a lot of respect for him.

DECKER: What's the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?

DICKINSON: I don't get embarrassed too often. I don't get embarrassed because I don't really care what other people think or feel. Let's see, embarrassed. I don't really have an embarrassing moment, you know, besides the normal stuff. But nothing unusual. You know, I never had my pants pulled down in public or any of that kind of stuff.

DECKER: How would you describe your sense of humor?

DICKINSON: I have a very good sense of humor. I think that that is what gets you through hard times. And no matter what the circumstances are, even tragedies and the horrible things that will happen to you in your life-- There's no doubt about it, things are going to happen to you that are going to knock you on your butt. And if you do not look at them with some--that there's some good in it or some sense of humor, you're not going to get through the day. And you have to be able to laugh at yourself. You have to think that you're the biggest joke going. You can't take yourself serious.

DECKER: Have you ever played a practical joke on someone?

DICKINSON: Practical joke.... Yes, I think one time or another.

DECKER: What would you say are your main hobbies?

DICKINSON: My main hobbies. I like board games. Is that a hobby? I like playing board games. We play a lot of like Monopoly and chess games and Trouble and Sorry, you know, that kind of-- A lot of family-type games.

DECKER: What is the most amazing thing that has ever happened to you?

DICKINSON: Oh, it has to be the birth of my daughters, without a doubt. It has to be able to watch a little baby come into this world that's you.

DECKER: Describe your religious beliefs.

DICKINSON: Well, I'm a Catholic. I'm a chosen Catholic. I'm not a lifer. Lifer meaning that my daughter makes her confirmation tomorrow, so she has practiced and studied for eight years. I've chosen to be a Catholic. Because St. Mary's in New Brunswick, we would go all the time to church, and I could never take Communion because I wasn't a full-fledged Catholic. So I had to go to catechism, and I went to night school. I believe in everything

that there is to believe when it comes to God. He's not one for messing around with. And you have to because you need to realize that there's somebody bigger than you.

DECKER: So you believe in the afterlife?

DICKINSON: Yes, I believe so. I believe that this is hell. I believe that we live in hell, and that after you die, that's heaven. Because then you're at peace, you have no pain, you have no worries. And I believe that there's definitely spirits as far as good spirits.

DECKER: Who's the most influential person in your religious life?

DICKINSON: My religious life? I would say Monsignor Kruppe from St. Mary's. Tough, tough, real. I have this tail here. He used to come and pull it--I mean like pull me almost all the way down. He was a tough guy. I respected him because he wasn't only the leader of our church, but he was a businessman. The Church is not only for religion, but it's also a place to go to be proud of. And Monsignor Kruppe used to be able to make a lot of money for the church because he was very politically involved. I would say him.

DECKER: Did anyone motivate you to join the religion, Catholic?

DICKINSON: Maybe my mother-in-law, you know, because I decided that once you get married, you have to--usually you pick your wife's.... Whoever's.... Like if you're Jewish and you're not Jewish, but you're a sincere Jewish person, you have to make a decision on which way to raise your family. So the deal was-- My wife is first-generation American. So the deal was that I would have to pick a religion, and the only religion that was on the table was Catholic. Then once you've committed to get married in the Catholic Church, after you have children, you commit your children to that. So you just kind of follow suit. Did that answer the question?

DECKER: Yes. What wise advice would you give to a grandchild on their wedding day?

DICKINSON: Treat each other like total strangers because people have a tendency of taking each other for granted. Like say, for instance, how you would go home tonight and not appreciate your mother, you would automatically assume that dinner's on the table and your underwear is going to be clean and folded. And if she's-- Like if you're watching something really stupid on television and by chance she's standing there, you'll say, "Hey, come on, I'm watching that." And you would never use that tone or that attitude with a total stranger. If you were in a store and somebody stood in front of you, you would be polite. You would

say, "Excuse me." Or you would say, "I was watching this. Could you move over a little bit?" So I think if you treat each other like total strangers, you'll have a very successful marriage. You don't take each other for granted.

DECKER: How old were you when you had your first date?

DICKINSON: My first date? I've always been a lover boy. So I don't know, 12? Pretty young, pretty young.

DECKER: Who was you first date?

DICKINSON: My sister's baby-sitter, yeah.

DECKER: Name a good friend that you have known for the longest period of time.

DICKINSON: Well, I have been blessed with friends that I've known since I'm a baby. I keep my friends. So I would say Bruce Housman, Lenny Raybine, Danny Paleo, Kenny Neibis, Billy Pelican, these are all guys that have been my friends for 40 years.

DECKER: What kinds of things did you do together when you were young?

DICKINSON: Let's see. Bicycle--we used to ride the bike. I live

on where Malouf Ford is now. Do you know where Malouf is? So from the opposite side of the highway where CVS and Bennigan's-- You know where Bennigan's? From Bennigan's to Route 27, where Hidden Lake is, from where Sabella Park is, all the way up to Johnson & Johnson, there was nothing there. There was not one house back there. So you'd be able to ride your bikes back there, and there was just nobody around. The big thing was to be able to cross the highway. And we would go to Tessie's, which was a little tiny store, and buy some candy and stuff.

But we used to play forts, a lot of forts. We always had forts. And wars, we would play a lot of war games like mud fights and stuff like that, pears. Because years ago a lot of the neighborhoods would always have fruit trees: apple trees and pears and plums because the Italians, especially in my section, would do a lot of canning. So on the property would be a lot of fruit. So when the fruit would come to harvest, the people would can it. You would jar it. That's like jarred fruit. You know what I'm talking about, jarred fruit?

DECKER: Right.

DICKINSON: Then you would can the fruit. But whatever hit the ground, you would use it to call a war on the other neighborhood. They would come over, and we'd have baskets of rotten pears, and we would throw pears at each other.

DECKER: How did you meet the person that you eventually married?

DICKINSON: I was at a party at my cousin Joe Lombardo's house, and we were sitting-- I was having a glass of wine, and we were sitting in his kitchen, and Mary walked in through the kitchen and down into the cellar. And I had said to Joe, I said, "I'm going to marry that girl." And he goes, "The hell you are because she's my cousin, and you stay away from her." And it wasn't until three years later I ran into her at North Brunswick Pub, and we've been together ever since.

DECKER: Can you describe your marriage proposal?

DICKINSON: My marriage proposal was that I asked Mary to marry me about nine, ten times. And every time I asked her to marry me, she said, "No." So I told her I wasn't going to ask her anymore. I said, "How many times can you tell me 'no'?" So one night we were at Sir John's, and we were having dinner. She said to me, "You know, it's been like three weeks since you've asked me to marry you." I said, "I'm not going to ask you to marry me anymore." She goes, "Well, tonight might be a good night." So I took the salt shaker off the table and got down on my knee, and I said, "Will you marry me?" And she said, "Yes." I still have the salt shaker.

DECKER: When and where did you get married?

DICKINSON: We got married, let's see, May 8, 1982, at St. Mary's on Remsen Avenue.

DECKER: Who was your best man?

DICKINSON: My brother. You always have your brother as your best man.

DECKER: Where did you go on your honeymoon?

DICKINSON: We went camping. We went two weeks' camping down--we went all through Maryland, Chesapeake Bay. I rented a camper. My job was to plan the honeymoon. So I got a canoe and bicycles. Rented a pop-up camper, not a mobile home, and hooked it up to the back of the car and dragged it around. It was fun. That was fun.

DECKER: What do you admire most about your spouse?

DICKINSON: Her righteousness. She's so correct. She's been so correct on her calls, on the right way to do things, the proper way to do things, the respectful way. I think that's because of her Italian heritage, not because she's an American. Because I think Americans have a tendency of being fat and lazy.

DECKER: Do you remember anything about your children that they did when they were small that amazed you?

DICKINSON: Well, the walking, you know, taking the first step. I remember my daughter could not walk. She couldn't keep her balance. My father-in-law, being from under Mussolini from Italy, totally different world in Europe, he took a piece of string, and he put it in her hand, just a piece of thread. And because she had that thread in her hand, she walked across the room. It's the same concept as a tightrope. If you're walking, but if you have the little balance beam that keeps you mentally thinking that that's going to keep you from falling off the rope-- And it was that piece of string. That's what they did in Italy. Give a kid a piece of string. And just because you had that little piece of string in your hand, you were able to walk. And the fact that they're very intelligent, the very intelligent.

DECKER: What was the funniest thing your children ever said when they were younger?

DICKINSON: That's a tough one. That's a tough one because there's a lot of times where they say things where as a parent you know what they're saying, but nobody else knows. Little code words that they had.

DECKER: If you had to do it all over again, would you change the

way you raised your family?

DICKINSON: Absolutely not. I wouldn't change a-- You know, because like John Belushi had a saying: There's no friend like an old friend because they know where you are, and they know where you've been. And I think that if you change anything, any sliding door-- You ever see that movie *Sliding Door*?

DECKER: No.

DICKINSON: Where she could have went through this door, and this is how her life would have turned, or she could have went through this door, and this is her how her life would have turned. So if you're in a position in your life where especially--I'm extremely happy where I'm at. I'm very successful, not only with my family but business and personal. If you change anything, any simple little turn one way or the other, you're not going to end up here. The changes that you make in your life right now are going to determine where you're at when you're 46 years old. No, I wouldn't make any changes.

DECKER: What did you find most difficult about raising children?

DICKINSON: Nothing. I love being a dad. It's my favorite thing to do. I have an excellent relationship with my daughters. I'm sometimes a little too open. I discuss drugs and sex and

strangers, and there's a lot of sick people in this world you have to be aware of. I'm extremely open on my philosophies about prejudice and just certain things that I feel, like Italian food is the best food. I think certain groups of people don't drive the correct way, you know. So I guess I maybe if I were to tone down--I'm very, very opinionated. So maybe if I could keep my opinions to myself, but that's not who I am.

DECKER: As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

DICKINSON: I always knew I was going to be involved with flowers, plants, or something along that line. I always gardened. Some kids could play the piano when they were four years old. I could have a piece of bark, and I can grow a tree out of it. Anything that I touched, I can have grow. And flowers, it's the same thing with flowers. I do a lot of, because I have a flower shop, I do a lot of flower arrangements and working with flowers. You know my family's goal was to be a dentist. Then I thought maybe about law enforcement because I loved working with kids. I loved the honesty--I just love the energy that comes off of kids.

DECKER: What was your first job?

DICKINSON: Stop & Shop florist. I was 15 years old, and I got a job in the produce department. The guy who was supposed to sweep the floor in the flower shop didn't show up, so they asked me to

go over and sweep the floor. So I said, "Yeah." So that was my first job in a flower shop, and I've been doing that ever since.

DECKER: How did you decide on your career?

DICKINSON: I think my career decided on me. I think that if I don't have flowers in a room, I get kind of like jammed up. I have to have like--always have to have flowers. Even when we go camping, I have to have some flowers around me or I get funny.

DECKER: Who was the person who had the most positive influence on your life?

DICKINSON: I would say my father. He was from a different world, they had different values. You know, he's old Italian. He taught me a lot of things about-- A simple lesson is that when you use a paintbrush-- Here's a good lesson for you. You'll remember this. When you get done painting, you clean the brush. Clean it real good. Wrap it up, clean it. So the next time you need that brush, you have a nice clean brush. And nobody ever taught me that. Because I would paint, and then I would put it in the bucket, and it would get all crappy and everything. Then the next time I needed a brush, I didn't have a brush. So it was lessons like that he taught me.

DECKER: Was there a person that really changed the course of

your life by doing something special for you?

DICKINSON: Well, I think there was a group of my friends because we decided to build a greenhouse. I had no idea. I'd never worked for a greenhouse. [Change to Side A of Tape]

I think my friends, my buddies, my buddies and their wives. Because we built the greenhouse from scratch. I built an entire business on wood that I found in dumpsters, from dumpster raids that people were either ripping off their porches and we cleaned up the wood. So I think my friends. I would have to say my buddies.

DECKER: Do you remember someone saying something to you that had a big impact on how you lived your life?

DICKINSON: Mrs. Irkes[sp?] in fifth grade. She was a nasty teacher. She was a rough teacher. She used to scratch my arm. And that was a turning point in my education because I used to rely too much on my mother and father's protection. And she would grab me by my arm and scratch me and tell me that I can do it on my own. So I think that was a turning point.

DECKER: If you had to say one person in your life is your hero, who would it be and why?

DICKINSON: One person. I would say my wife. I would have to say

my wife. And the reason for that is because it's very difficult to do the right thing all the time. You know character is based on how you act when no one is watching. And Mary--when no one is watching, she acts right. Most people, if they see you watching, then they try to act correctly. But my wife always acts correctly.

DECKER: How would you describe yourself politically?

DICKINSON: I'm a Republican, but I've voted for the people that I thought should be-- Let's say I'm a Republican, but I've voted for a lot of Democrats here in town. I basically voted Republican, but I vote for the person that I feel would do the right job.

DECKER: Who do you feel is the most influential politician in the 20th century on the national level and then on the local level?

DICKINSON: Ronald Reagan and simply because he gave Americans pride back, made you feel proud to be an American again. Made you feel like this is the greatest country in the world, and you didn't care what other nations thought. And locally, a politician locally? Local government meaning who? Like our town?

DECKER: Yes.

DICKINSON: I've been through a lot of the mayors, all the mayors, Mayor Hermann, Nichol, Pinkus, Jack Pinkus. That's a tough one. What is it now, what are you asking me?

DECKER: Most influential politician in the 20th century, local level.

DICKINSON: Local level. A lot of the politicians, you know, I think that they start off with a plan. And then politics is not as easy as what people think, and what happens is you have to start playing the game, and then you lose some of your integrity, you lose some of your will because you need to flip-flop. I don't think there's any local people that have really stood out. Years ago we had Frank Pelle. He ended up being commissioner of the lottery. He was a councilman from North Brunswick. He ended up being commissioner of the New Jersey State Lottery. He's a pharmacist. Maybe because he was able to achieve a higher goal, maybe something like that?

DECKER: Were you alive during World War I, World War II, Korean War, or the Vietnam War?

DICKINSON: Well, there was the Vietnam War, right? Nineteen fifty-six. That was in the sixties, wasn't it? 'Sixty-seven, somewhere around there. Desert Storm. I was alive as far as--

Well, my family members, everybody was in World War II. So you heard from one side of Italy not being an ally of the United States, but Mussolini. So you heard what they were doing over there. Then you heard from my father being in the war and my uncles.

DECKER: Where were you for Pearl Harbor?

DICKINSON: Where was I before Pearl Harbor? That's a question for your grandfather. That's before my time.

DECKER: Where were you when you first learned about the assassination of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.?

DICKINSON: Well, I was on the third step. I was on the third step coming downstairs of my parents' home when I heard about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Martin Luther King, I don't recall exactly where I was. I know that Martin Luther King was a great idea. I don't know whether we should have a federal holiday, but I think that he was a great man in his theories and in his words. They even have a poster on him up at Linwood, on the second landing of Linwood. Have you seen that?

DECKER: No.

DICKINSON: About it's not the words that you say that you'll be

judged, but it's the words that you don't say. Look at that sometime. It's a real--it's a moving poster. It's right on the top landing at Linwood upstairs.

DECKER: How did these events influence your opinion on the current state of world affairs and the war with Iraq?

DICKINSON: I think that the United States-- I think that we should all have our opinions. But once the president decides on which way we should go, we should back him up. Whether we disagree or agree, I think at a time of war or a time of national tragedy such as assassinations, we should all unite.

DECKER: What major technological advances have there been in your lifetime?

DICKINSON: Too many. Too many that haven't done what their purpose-- Computers are totally useless. Libraries--you know, people don't read books. Cell phones. If you're not an emergency technician or a police officer, you shouldn't have a cell phone. I don't think that it's-- Fax machines. I've done an entire wedding and never spoke to the bride. Never spoke to her. Years ago it wasn't like that. People would talk, you would talk, you would get the feel for the other person, you would shake the other person's hand. I've done entire jobs faxing stuff back and forth. So what good has that done? What good has that done? What

good is washing machines and all the kitchen appliances that were supposed to be developed to give everyone free time? It hasn't done anything. Microwaves? It's produced terrible foods. I think technology is all overrated.

DECKER: What changes in courtship and dating have occurred during your time?

DICKINSON: I don't think too much. I think it's basically about the same thing. You have a guy and a girl, and, you know, everybody has the same motives. I think that maybe people had more respect for themselves. I think that's the problem with young people. Somewhere along the line they think that it's all about me, me, me, and it's not about respect, about your friends. I think courtships are--I think it's always been the same. It's just that the music has changed.

DECKER: Describe North Brunswick when you first moved into the township.

DICKINSON: I've been here all my life. Sooner or later developing is going to happen. People are going to move in. I think that you can't--it's very difficult to control or stop it. I think it's gotten to the point where there's a lot of traffic, but a percentage of the traffic isn't from residents. It's from people-- Like where I live right now there would be 1500 cars a

day. Now there's like 85,000 cars a day go past on Route 1, and none of them live in North Brunswick. So it's not only North Brunswick. It's everybody around us. I think it's a very good town to raise a family. I think that if you have that attitude--I would be able to raise my family well and educate it anywhere. So you can't blame your local people, you can't blame your planning board. You need to take some responsibility for it yourself.

DECKER: As a child, which parks in the township did you play in, and how have they changed over the years?

DICKINSON: Well, there wasn't Veteran Park. That's the one down by Parsons School.

DECKER: Babbage Park.

DICKINSON: Babbage Park. There was Babbage Park, but that was just--there was nothing. They didn't even have swings down there. Sabella Park. Now that was named after my next-door neighbor, Joseph Sabella. He was the first officer--he was the first military person killed in the Korean War in Adams Station. Adams Station is a section of North Brunswick. He was the first one killed in North Brunswick. So the park was named after Joseph Sabella. And did you know that Sabella Park-- You see how it's deep? Now, what they did was-- You see when you're driving over Route-- You know where North Brunswick Pub is and they have the

bridge that goes up and then down? Well, years ago the Pennsylvania Railroad owned all that property, even where Sabella Park is. And they dug all that-- Why Sabella Park is down like that is all that dirt was taken out of Sabella Park to build the mound so they could build the Pennsylvania Railroad. That's why Sabella Park is so low. All that dirt was moved over to make the mound for the Pennsylvania Railroad to make their under, their tunnel--to make a tunnel; there was a bridge there.

DECKER: After all these years of living here, what keeps you around the town?

DICKINSON: I just love it here, you know, the people. The fact that you get an opportunity to talk to one of your friend's children eventually. So you feel comforted, you feel secure that this is your home. You know, there's no place like home. Well, hopefully you'll get married, and you'll go away, and you'll travel the world and everything. But there's no place like home.

DECKER: Did you ever participate in any local events or clubs in the town?

DICKINSON: Like the parades? You know, I take care of all the parades for the cheerleaders and football, that kind of stuff. I try to get involved in all the community things as far as anything that's asked of the community. Let's see. That's about

it.

DECKER: Can you describe what the community was like, if there was a sense of unity among the residents?

DICKINSON: I think it's the same sense of unity now as what it was back then, but it's just a larger number of people. There's just a lot of people, so you don't get to know your neighbors as well. It was a smaller group of people, so it was the same circle. You had the same circle of people that do all the work all the time. The people that are involved in soccer, _____, and all that, those guys do all the work for soccer; they take care of soccer. The guys that do all the work for baseball.

So I think that what happens is you get into circles of people who-- It's the same people at Livingston Park that do the PTA stuff as what they do the clubs. It's not so much that people-- You have to remember that the cost of living, it's so expensive to live anywhere, that you need to make a lot of money. You need to make a lot of money to have a standard of living where you can go out and have dinner and go out and get pizza pie and a movie at \$75. You know, it's a lot of money. So years ago it was a little bit easier. It's the same difference. Like even though my father may have only made \$27 a week or whatever, it wasn't that much to go to the movies. So I think that what's happening now is that everything--everybody's got to have everything. And there's such a cost factor there that people have

lost the whole concept that the main thing is to raise your family.

DECKER: Did you get along with your neighbors and have get-togethers with other people that lived close to you?

DICKINSON: Absolutely, all the time. All the time. The woman who is my emergency call person for my daughters was mine. So the woman, Sue Shambray, she, if there was something wrong and we had school, the school would call her. Now the school calls her for my daughters. So I think that-- It was a slower pace. It was a quieter time, you know, when I was growing up. It wasn't so crazy. Everybody's just going-- Like if you play soccer, what else do you play?

DECKER: Basketball, anything else.

DICKINSON: Yes, yes. But school activities and everything, see, it wasn't like that. You played one thing, you did one thing. Sometimes you have to leave one sport because you're late for another sport. Or if you have to decide on what sport you want to go to. For what reason you do that? You go crazy, right? And do you go outside and play?

DECKER: Sometimes.

DICKINSON: Like walk around the neighborhood, or play with just the kid that's next door?

DECKER: Not as much now as I used to.

DICKINSON: No, because you have no time. Because I think that organized sports are good in the town, but they've also taken away from the community. Where everything has to be organized for you to play ball. Everything has to be ran and told you have to be here at four o'clock for practice and this. Where before we didn't have that. Where you knew that if you wanted to be bowling, Saturday morning you went down and you bowled.

DECKER: Did any national or international events affect the way your community lived their daily life?

DICKINSON: I guess any type of crisis that happens. That always affects. You know, September 11th. They had a nice ceremony out here a year later. That affects people. I think that's pretty obvious that, you know, it trickles down. You know people in North Brunswick are the backbone of this country. If it wasn't for people from North Brunswick, what kind of country would you have?

DECKER: What political party was in power when you were first in the town?

DICKINSON: The Democrats have always been in power. Hermann, Pinkus, Jack Pinkus. The senior citizen building is named after him. Charles Nichol. Paul Marisari. He was mayor for a long time. Democrats.

DECKER: How is the township now different from what it was when you first moved here? And is it better or worse, in your opinion?

DICKINSON: Well, I don't know if it's worse. I think it's just different times. You have a lot of new people here. You have a lot of people here that haven't been here for 40 years or the people haven't been here. My parents bought the house right after World War II. So you had a sense of pride in your town. Now you have people that are moving here, they don't speak English, they're from a different culture. I'm not saying-- There's no difference from a lot of the Indian folks that are moving here compared to the Italians that moved here. But the difference is that the Italian people--and years ago you integrated your neighborhood, you all became one. Now everybody's so busy just trying to feed their family before it's bedtime that they just don't have the time. I think it's a nice community. I think it's a safe community. I think the people that are in charge are sincere. I've always thought that, whether they're Democrats or Republicans. I thought that, you know, the police department, the educational system's excellent. The recreation department--you

can't touch it; it's phenomenal. It gives all the kids opportunities. There are so many different things that are going on.

DECKER: If you were in office, would you make any changes to the town, anything that you think would benefit the town?

DICKINSON: Well, you know, I've always lived that if you're going to criticize something, then you should get involved. So I don't criticize anything because politics, it's a very difficult job because you're not going to make everybody happy no matter what you do. You could have the best programs put into place, and someone's still going to complain. So I think that town is run pretty tight. I think that the people that are making the calls are trying to do the best that they can.

DECKER: How has living in North Brunswick made you a better person?

DICKINSON: Made me a better person? Well, I don't have anything to compare it to, but it's given me a sense of pride. You know, it's given me a sense of belonging, those kinds of feelings.

DECKER: What have you learned about yourself and about life in general during your years living in the township?

DICKINSON: That volunteers should be more--there should be more volunteers. I think that people should give more of themselves, don't be so selfish. Don't criticize the coaches. You know, I think a lot of the youth sports are excellent if you could get rid of the parents.

DECKER: If you could convey one thought or idea to the entire township, what would it be?

DICKINSON: Try a little harder. Try to give back what the town has given you. Try to not take and see what's in it for you. Try to do something without being asked or being credited.

DECKER: That about wraps it up.

[End of Interview]